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—Allen H. Neuharth, Founder, Sept. 15, 1982

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Today's debate: Employment drug tests

Outdated drug tests put public safety at risk

OUR VIEW Yet, government resists using more foolproof methods.

John Drabick was no fool. In 1998, he abstained from his heroin habit long enough to pass a urine test and get a job — as a grade-school bus driver. Luckily, he was caught. On the way to pick up some children while high on heroin, he crashed the bus into an off-duty police officer's car.

Less lucky were 22 passengers aboard a tourist bus in New Orleans who were killed last Mother's Day when their driver, Frank Bedell, high on marijuana, crashed into an abutment. Bedell had passed his pm-employment urine test despite a long history of drug abuse.

Such threats to public safety led the Department of Transportation in December to issue new rules to toughen its screening for illicit drugs. But even the stricter testing standards DOT endorses won't catch all cheaters.

What DOT and other safety agencies really need are better drug tests. And on that score the agency that sets standards for drug testing has been dragging its feet for seven years.

More than 8 million people in safety-sensitive transportation jobs are subject to drug testing under federal standards set by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Yet the tests are easy to beat. For pre-employment drug tests, such as those defeated by Bedell and Drabick, all applicants need to do is abstain for a few days.

To evade random urinalysis tests, drug users buy adulterants that mask the drugs they use. That has forced labs to do costly additional testing to uncover adulterants. But labs can't screen out clean human urine provided by friends or sold over the Internet and heated to body temperature using special devices.

None of these failings, though, has moved the government to speed development of standards for other drug-testing technologies. Officials say such technologies are unproven and

Cheating drug tests

People use a variety of methods to beat urine tests. Among the most common:

► **In-vitro adulteration:** Adding foreign substances to a urine sample to disrupt the test or destroy the presence of a drug. Drug disrupters include common soap, bleach, salt and vinegar. Drug destroyers include nitrites and other oxidizing agents.

► **Dilution:** Reducing the concentration of drugs below screening levels by adding fluid to a specimen or drinking lots of fluids before testing.

► **Substitution:** Replacing a donor's sample with a drug-free specimen, usually by smuggling a clean specimen into the collection site. Samples must be heated to body temperature to avoid detection.

could be unfair. After seven years of investigation, they say the earliest standards for new drug tests can be implemented is 2003.

Yet, one such technology, hair testing, has been around for a decade. It's used by the Federal Reserve, more than a thousand private businesses and an increasing number of police agencies.

The test is harder to cheat because it provides a longer view of drug behavior, up to three months, making it ideal for pre-employment testing. New York City's police department detected five times the number of drug users among its recruits with hair tests than it did with urine tests, and at 30 times the rate among probationary officers. After switching to hair tests last year, Boston's police department reported finding 23 drug users on its force that urinalysis had missed.

If John Drabick had taken a hair test, he never would have gotten behind the wheel of a school bus. If Frank Bedell had taken one, 22 people would be alive today.

Instead, safety took a back seat to the bureaucratic caution that protects drug users at public expense.